

VZCZCXYZ0010
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHWN #0653/01 2892116
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 162116Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7883
INFO RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC
RHMFIS/DEPT OF HOMELAND SEC IA WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRIDGETOWN 000653

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/27/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM XL
SUBJECT: RELEASE OF LAST OF THE GRENADA 17 BRIEFLY SHAKES
UP POLITICS

Classified By: CDA Brent Hardt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The release on September 5, 2009 of the last of the "Grenada 17" -- those in prison for their roles in the assassination of then-Prime Minister Maurice Bishop --, caused a brief but energetic outpouring of political vitriol in the days following the government's action. The government, noting the releases were only one year ahead of the original 2010 end of sentences, maintained that the decision was made for purely humanitarian reasons. Nevertheless, the move sparked a range of commentary, including inflammatory hints by former Prime Minister Keith Mitchell that parolee Bernard Coard and his associates were plotting to overthrow the current government and restore a socialist state. Reactions of the man in the street, meanwhile, ranged from disinterest to disappointment. The move also generated extensive commentary in regional media, with Barbados' largest circulation daily running several days' worth of retrospection on the events. The varied views, for and against the release, made clear that 26 years after the traumatic event that prompted the U.S.- led intervention, emotions and political divisions still run strong. End Summary

Government Downplays Release

¶2. (C) Philip Alexander, one of Prime Minister Tillman Thomas' chief aides described the release of the remaining seven of the original "Grenada 17" as nothing more than a humanitarian gesture aimed at reconciliation. He noted that the convicts were due to be released the next year and, as far as the government was concerned, it was simply not a big deal. He noted that the remaining prisoners had been in prison for over 25 years, and most were in declining health.

¶3. (C) Bernard Coard, Bishop's former deputy, who led the assassination plot against him, gave extensive interviews in the press following his release in which he described the revolution as having gotten off track due to Bishop's developing a cult of personality. He remained unrepentant, generating heated discussions in the media and within political circles. Coard described being tortured in prison during the first five years of his imprisonment, but claimed that the torture stopped thereafter. He alleged that his trial was rigged against him and his co-defendants as the judge was clearly biased and made many procedural and other legal errors. To deflect public attention from one of the last mysteries of the period -- that of the resting place for Bishop's remains -- Coard called for the USG and the Grenadian government to reveal what happened to Maurice

Bishop's body. Coard and others have long maintained that the U.S. Army recovered the bodies during the intervention and still have them in the U.S. Following his release, Coard has left Grenada and moved to Jamaica to join his wife and work on his memoirs.

¶4. (C) Many Embassy opposition contacts expressed outrage that Coard was released at all, unconvinced by the government's explanation that the decision was merely a humanitarian gesture aimed at reconciliation. Younger Grenadians, however, were generally dismissive of the issue, many of the opinion that the incident is "ancient history." They also generally thought that, since the remaining prisoners were due to be released soon in any event, and were in bad health, that an early release was of little concern.

Extensive Media Coverage

¶5. (U) The leading papers in the region all devoted considerable coverage to the release, as did the local television programs. The Barbados and Grenadian media carried multi-page inserts rehashing the history of the events, interviews with Coard and the other released prisoners, as well as interviews with other key players including the Judge in the case who was from Barbados. In his column, "Congrats, Grenada", Barbadian political pundit and pollster Peter Wickham sparked a round of critical commentary from other op-ed writers by asserting that it was right to release the prisoners because "Grenada and the 17 learned an important lesson from that October's events...and the country is better off as a result. Bernard Coard now

understands and indeed every Grenadian now appreciates that he understands the nature of his actions and that he and others are genuinely sorry for what they did." Much of the press coverage, by contrast, focused on Coard's lack of remorse. A number of papers noted that he was treated almost as a hero upon his release. One contact noted to emboff that this was almost as distasteful as watching Khaddafi give the Lockerbee bomber a hero's welcome upon his release. He went on to say that Coard and the others should have been executed for their crimes a long time ago and he was aghast that they were being treated as heroes.

Opposition Spins, Spins, Spins

¶6. (C) Opposition leader and former PM Keith Mitchell was quick to use the release for his own political gain. Mitchell alleged to emboff that Coard was working secretly with Finance Minister Nazim Burke to raise funds from Venezuelan and Iranian interests to support the current government. He further alleged, although he provided no proof, that Coard and Burke are plotting to overthrow the current government and install a socialist state. Making full use of the attention generated by Coard's release, Mitchell passed to emboff a document alleging, *inter alia*, that Burke authorized a transfer of USD 4.3 million to a Swiss bank account owned by the Cuban Central Bank, and dubbed it sovereign debt repayment. The money was then allegedly used by Burke and his family and associates to support their exile in Canada. Burke was also accused of extorting money from Amerijet corporation when he was finance minister in 1981. According to the document, the firm transferred over USD 1.2 million to Burke's Cayman Islands accounts.

Comment

¶7. (C) The early release of the remaining seven of the "Grenada 17", though billed as a humanitarian gesture aimed at reconciliation, has evoked a new wave of soul-searching about a series of events that continue to traumatize and

confound Grenadians, and that reverberate throughout this generally stable and peaceful region of democracies. It was not surprising that this government, with its close links to Grenada, would release Coard early as a gesture to the party's "base." While younger Grenadians have limited emotional investment in the assassination and subsequent events, the release has irritated old scars among the older generation in Grenada and elsewhere in the region, who recall the fear that the militarization of Grenada spread internally and externally, and the violence and repression that this ill-fated deviation from the region's democratic traditions generated.

HARDT